

**40. A summary of the conference panel: Effective communication of research data to decision makers**

Mark Rasmuson was Director of the HEALTHCOM Project at the Academy of Educational Development at the time of the conference. His presentation made strong use of the visual apparatus and software that can be effective tools in dealing with busy decision makers. Computer software and less expensive hardware are making its use in the presentation of data more common. However, Rasmuson joined others on the panel in emphasizing that the use of data should be planned at an early stage of a study or project. - Eds.

THE PANEL S THEME of communicating data effectively to decision makers was elaborated on by Mark Rasmuson, Director of the Academy for Educational Development's HEALTHCOM Project. He noted that those responsible for development policy decisions may have little or no training in research methodology, or, if they do, it is likely to be a strictly quantitative orientation (E.G. epidemiologists in ministries of health). They are also often busy managers, with many management decisions facing them on a daily basis. Thus, any effective research communication approach should have three characteristics. It should overcome bias against qualitative methods, be decision-related, and be presented creatively and visually.

Overcoming bias against qualitative research methods, such as focus group discussions, requires educating decision makers about the complementary use of qualitative and quantitative research. Part of that education must emphasize that qualitative methods, while sometimes simpler to design and execute, have their own rigorous standards of use, which if not observed, can lead to misleading and even harmful conclusions.

In discussing how to make research related to the types of concrete management decisions policy makers are faced with, Mr. Rasmuson contrasted standard research design with the "backward marketing research" approach proposed in the book *Cheap But Good Marketing Research* by Dr. Alan Andreasen, an expert in the field of "social marketing." Unlike standard research design, which begins with a theoretical "definition of the research problem," the backward marketing research approach starts with determination of the key decisions to be made with the research results and then decides the information needed and methods to be used to help make those decisions.

<i>Standard research design</i>	<i>Backward marketing research</i> (from Alan Andreasen)
Define the research problem	Determine key decisions to be made using research results
Check secondary sources	Determine what information will help management make the best decision
Determine primary research	Prepare prototype report and ask management if this is what will best help make decisions
Estimate research costs	Determine analysis necessary to fill in report

Design questionnaire	Determine what questions must be asked to provide data required by the analysis
Design sample	Ascertain whether the needed questions have already been answered
Implement research design	Design sample
Analyze data	Implement research design
Write report	Analyze data
	Write report
	Assist management; implement the results
	Evaluate the research process and contribution

Finally, Mr. Rasmuson demonstrated how data may be presented in a creative and visual manner through projection in colour on a large screen using a laptop computer, projector and the IBM software package "Storyboard." Such programmes not only allow for selected research results to be presented in a simple, compelling fashion, accessible to a group of decision makers, but also have the capacity to be interactive: changes in the data may be input to show immediately and graphically what the resulting changes in output would be.